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ABSTRACT

A study examined the methods by which English faculty in Virginia's community colleges keep abreast of new developments in their fields, the effectiveness of their methods, and steps that the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) might take to enhance professional development. Personal interviews were conducted with English faculty at local universities, face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with a selective sample of community college faculty, and telephone interviews were conducted with randomly selected faculty outside the state. Results indicated that: (1) most community college English faculty in Virginia were engaged in professional development activities of one kind or another, activities ranging from publication of textbooks to traveling abroad to reading professional journals; (2) those who reported active involvement in professional development activities within their discipline in many cases did not teach in that discipline; (3) the majority of faculty interviewed stressed that there was insufficient time (because of heavy teaching responsibilities) to pursue activities considered endemic to the profession; and (4) community college faculty were committed to students, to teaching, and to the community college mission. Findings suggest that increased time for professional development and increased collegiality are crucial to increased professional awareness and activity among language and literature faculty in Virginia's community colleges. (RS)

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Professional Development Issues for Community College English Faculty

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The conviction that community college faculty teach and university faculty research is firmly ingrained in the culture of the community college, as the following statement from an English professor illustrates.

> *As a community-college English instructor immersed in teaching . . . I have very little time to study theories of composition and pedagogy. And yet, out of a desire to improve as a teacher, I read theory in what little time I have. I look outside my classroom to learn what theoreticians have to say about what happens in my classroom. . . . [T]he theoreticians, those writing the journal articles and presenting papers, are most likely to be from universities. (Tinberg, 1991)*

The community college culture, according to Vaughan (1991), has historically rejected scholarship on the basis that it is contrary to the community college mission. However, recent studies (Vaughan and Palmer, 1991, 1992) conclude, as does Tinberg, that teaching and scholarship need not exist as polar opposites; indeed, it has become evident that the two must exist in harmony if community colleges are to remain viable institutions of higher learning. In a national survey of the scholarly activities of community college faculty, Palmer (1992) found that as many as 80 percent of full-time community college faculty "are actively engaged in the production of works that are of *potential* scholarly value" (p. 64). Palmer's finding is based on Vaughan's broad definition of scholarship as an objective, rational, systematic pursuit of a topic through critical analysis. This pursuit results in a product (be it a lecture, a book review, a speech, or the more traditional products of scholarly pursuit) that is shared and subject to the criticism of other professionals in the discipline or field. Scholarship, even given this broad definition, "requires one to have a solid foundation in one's professional field and to keep current with developments in that field" (p. 6). During the early years of community college proliferation nationwide, Garrison (1967) recognized that faculty effectiveness would most likely be compromised by the "student-centered attitude of

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the two-year colleges." He believed that this attitude is time-consuming and expensive. "Not the least part of the expense is the reduction of time and opportunities for teachers to keep themselves refreshed and up-to-date in their own disciplines" (p. 78).

In this study, I set out to discover the methods by which English faculty in Virginia's community colleges keep abreast of new developments in their fields, the effectiveness of their methods, and steps that the Virginia Community College System, hereafter referred to as the VCCS, might take to enhance professional development.

Personal interviews were conducted with English faculty at local universities in order to ascertain their methods for keeping current in their disciplines and to compare the effectiveness of their methods with the ones used by community college faculty. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with a selective sample of community college faculty in order to determine the current state of professional development among English faculty in the VCCS. Finally, telephone interviews were conducted with randomly selected faculty outside the state.

Interviews revealed that most community college English faculty inVirginia are engaged in professional development activities of one kind or another, activities ranging from publication of textbooks to traveling abroad to reading professional journals. It is here that one must distinguish between scholarly activities and other professional development activities. Of the activities that faculty said they engage in for professional development, only a few could reasonably be considered scholarly in nature, since scholarly activities, even according to Vaughan's liberal definition, must result in a *product* that is shared and is subject to the criticism of professionals. Does that make those activities that cannot be considered scholarly because there is no tangible end product invalid or worthless for professional development? I would argue that it does not; any activity that results in increased knowledge of the discipline and that broadens one's understanding of teaching in that discipline is a viable means of professional development. To reiterate, scholarly activities are those that involve research and result in publication or some other tangible product that is open to criticism. Scholarly activities certainly fall under the larger category of professional development activities, but they represent only one form or method of professional development. The following is a complete list of the activities that faculty cited as useful for keeping up with changes and developments in their disciplines.

- Reading professional books and journals
- Preparing presentations for conferences
- Attending conferences--local, regional, state, and national
- Participating in professional development activities planned by the college
- Engaging in formal graduate studies to obtain a higher degree
- Engaging informally in graduate studies by taking classes of interest
- Participating in seminars, workshops, and summer institutes
- Engaging with colleagues in professional dialogue
- Membership in professional organizations
- Publishing
- Creative endeavors in writing, art, film, and drama
- Travel
- Reviewing texts and talking with publishers

One question that arises in considering the effectiveness of these activities for professional development is whether or not they are discipline specific. For example, although most faculty said that they attend the professional development activities planned by their institutions, they concur that pre-service and in-service activities generally offer "nothing specifically related to teaching in the field." Also, a large number of faculty who cited working toward a doctoral degree as a professional development activity are not studying in their discipline; rather they plan to receive degrees in education or administration, often because those are the only accessible doctoral programs. When professional development is narrowed down to development in the teaching field, it would seem that many of the activities cited are inappropriate as true professional development activities and that faculty are not as professionally active as it might at first appear. Cohen & Brawer (1977) and Seidman (1985) suggest that community college faculty tend not to be involved in discipline-specific professional development. Likewise, in many cases, English faculty interviewed during this study tended to be largely uninvolved in professional development in their discipline.

Those who reported active involvement in professional development activities within their discipline--the discipline in which their graduate degrees were received--in many cases did not

teach in that discipline. The most common example is the faculty member whose undergraduate and graduate work was in literature and who teaches composition. There is a widespread misconception that having a degree in English, regardless of the emphasis, qualifies one to teach composition. Fortunately, in recent years many graduate programs have begun to prepare students for teaching composition. That still leaves a great many veteran faculty who were trained in literature or drama or speech who teach writing. Because community college faculty are so teaching oriented, many have chosen to participate only in professional development activities related to their teaching field(s), even if it differs from the field in which they received graduate degrees.

The majority of faculty interviewed stressed the fact that there is insufficient time to pursue even those activities, like reading journals and engaging in professional dialogue, that would be considered endemic to the profession. Many believe that teaching five or six classes each semester, in addition to serving on committees, sponsoring student organizations, teaching night classes, and conferencing with students outside of class, leaves little time to pursue professional development . One English department head who has been teaching in the community college for more than 20 years best stated what others expressed:

> *The system makes no distinction between teaching English or other classes that require less intervention time. After teaching composition for twenty years with no break, there's no excitement. There's no time for scholarship. Grading papers, teaching overloads every semester, and not getting paid or appreciated enough wears you down. Most English faculty can't even take the summer off. How can we be expected to be on the cutting edge?*

Although some faculty members do find the time to engage in traditional scholarly research, they are the exceptions. There is a general feeling that there is little time for professional development of any kind, particularly scholarly pursuits involving publication. Frustration and regret typically describe the feelings of many faculty who say they are unable to stay as professionally up-to-date as they would like, as is illustrated by this faculty comment.

To ask faculty teaching six classes a semester to also put lots of time into professional development is a cruel joke. Sure, I feel that I should be professionally active, but when? While trying to grade 150 papers a week?

Three broad areas were identified from this study as crucial to increased professional awareness and activity among language and literature faculty in Virginia's community colleges: increased time for professional development, increased collegiality, and greater accessibility and flexibility in graduate programs. Only the first two areas will be discussed here since graduate programs in Virginia's universities are of concern primarily to residents of that state.

Faculty consistently expressed the need for more time to engage in activities that would help them to stay up to date with new developments in their disciplines. Time is perceived as a crucial need, time to develop an individual professional development plan and time to become rejuvenated enough to carry out that plan. One faculty member commented, "Just one semester of released time to catch up with new things in the profession would be invaluable. After twelve years, you get so caught up in what you're doing you get numb as to what's going on around you." In addition to sabbaticals or released time for a semester or a year, faculty expressed the need to be able to get away for a few days to attend a conference or to engage in other professional development activities without excessive complications. Class coverage was a significant concern.

Due to the excessive amount of time involved in evaluating student writing, composition faculty have even less time to dedicate to professional development than do their colleagues in other disciplines. Although the Guidelines for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1989) were developed to circumvent excessive demands on composition faculty that ultimately hinder effective teaching, the guidelines are not always adhered to. The guidelines recommend that no more than 20 students be permitted in any writing class, that no English faculty member teach more than 60 writing students in a term, and that all writing instructors have access to "scholarly literature and be given opportunities for continuing professional development" (p. 336). The State Council for Higher Education in Virginia sets the student to faculty funding ratio at 22:1, which is slightly higher than the CCCC recommendation but is nonetheless acceptable. No more than 22 students should be assigned to a composition class, and, because the field of composition is changing so rapidly, faculty who teach

composition should be granted increased time to keep current in the field. Also, in disciplines that are writing intensive, no more than a fifteen-credit-hour teaching load should be assigned to faculty. Faculty who said that they regularly teach more than five classes per semester were, in most cases, far less involved in professional development activities, and they were more likely to express feelings of professional "burn-out" than were those teaching regular loads.

Often the time and money needed for professional development is made available through grants. At many institutions, faculty said grant money was the primary funding for professional development activities. Increased faculty awareness of and access to requests for proposals, perhaps through grants officers within institutions, is needed.

The second need expressed most by English faculty in this study was the need for increased professional contact and communication with colleagues. A sense of professional isolation was expressed by one or more faculty members at every community college I visited. This need for collegiality is evidenced by the large number of faculty who cited conference attendance as the most beneficial activity for professional development. As one noted, "It's exciting to discover different ways of teaching content. Conference attendance, especially with community college faculty, is most helpful. It's important to connect with other people who are teaching the same classes."

Many faculty expressed the desire to be able to observe the teaching of their colleagues. Mentor programs involving the assignment of full-time faculty as mentors to new faculty or adjuncts, have been successful at other institutions. These mentor programs encourage a willingness among faculty to share professional insights and experience with others. If this concept were enlarged to include faculty from other institutions, either two-year or four-year, pairing up to share professional experiences, then collegiality would certainly be enhanced.

Faculty also expressed the desire to be able to move between institutions in the system; for example, a residency program might be established that would enable a professor to teach at another institution in the state for a semester or a year in order to gain from and contribute to the professional development of colleagues statewide.

On some campuses, faculty have access to computer networks, such as MEGABYTE UNIVERSITY, that link faculty members together by providing them with a forum for sharing

professional information in a timely, informal way. Faculty who were involved in network communication with colleagues were very enthusiastic about this professional development activity. Every professor should have easy access to a computer and should have the opportunity to subscribe to a professional network.

On some campuses in the state English faculty schedule weekly or monthly brown-bag, lunch-time reading/discussion groups throughout the semester. These groups are perceived by those involved as a positive way not only to keep up with important disciplinary issues but to keep up communication with colleagues as well.

Another finding, which is certainly not new, is that community college faculty are committed to students, to teaching, and to the community college mission. English faculty members are proud of the positive learning experiences they have shared with students. Many, however, particularly composition professors, feel that they have been undervalued by the system, and they question whether or not they will be able to keep giving year after year under current conditions. The following quotations best illustrate the way many are thinking and feeling:

> *People came to the community college because we loved the discipline, we wanted student contact, we believed in pedagogy. But over the years, we have been taken advantage of. The system has not nurtured the faculty. We're left trying to hang on for another semester. I think the community college concept is still valid. I believe in students. We have given students a second chance, we have changed lives, but we haven't been taken care of. People aren't going to make it to 30 years.*

> *I think we've lost sight of what our mission is, but I take what I'm doing here very seriously. These students are in need of an education; I regret that we don't have a more vigorous approach to educating them.*

The fact that community college English faculty identify themselves as teachers, not researchers, results in their interest in pedagogical issues over theoretical ones, which is not to say that faculty are wholly unaware of theoretical advances in their teaching fields, just that those advances tend to be valued on the basis of whether or not they have pedagogical potential. One

professor commented, "I only buy into those theories that I can make classroom use of." Research tends to be perceived by faculty as a luxury that only university faculty--who have lighter teaching loads and fewer students--can afford. Palmer (1991) suggests that this perception is perpetuated by the community college culture: "If rejection of research as a legitimate institutional function is one step away from rejection of scholarship entirely . . . then the practice of embracing pedagogy at the expense of disciplinary work is a corollary action that also limits the community college role in scholarship." (p. 72). It would seem that both faculty and institutions need to reassess the validity of a long-standing commitment to teaching that does not incorporate a strong commitment to scholarship. Tinberg, who is quoted at the beginning of this paper, discovers that the classroom itself offers numerous opportunities for research and that, indeed, good teaching requires that the teacher act as researcher in observing teaching and learning as it occurs in the classroom. Classroom research is one example of scholarship that clearly supports teaching.

If professional development is to become an institutional priority, then support for it must be shown through funding, which would necessitate the development of an identifiable budget line for professional development. Funds for professional development should be made available to every faculty member and should be allocated in a systematic, fair way. In recent years of budgetary cutbacks, faculty in community colleges throughout the state have seen that "professional development is the first thing to get cut in a [budgetary] crunch." The earmarking of specific funds for professional development would send a clear message to faculty that professional development is important; this message is a necessary first step toward integrating scholarship into the institutional culture.

Unquestionably, faculty must actively participate in professional development activities on a regular and ongoing basis in order to keep up with new developments in the teaching field. One faculty member who felt that his institution had funded professional development well said, "In most of the cases I'm aware of, people have discontinued or chosen not to pursue professional development activities for personal reasons [lack of interest, outside obligations, illness, etc.]" While sometimes there are valid reasons for being unable to participate in professional renewal, and while a lack of professional zeal among a few is not unique to community college faculty, faculty must, as professionals, assume the primary responsibility for professional development.

Reading professional journals, engaging with colleagues in dialogue about professional issues, and keeping up with new developments in the discipline are basic professional obligations, obligations that must be honored if we are to help to integrate professional development into the institutional culture. Making professional development a more serious part of faculty evaluation, as has been recommended by Vaughan (1991), Block (1991), and others, might encourage more active participation in professional development activities.

Even though professional development should be expected of every faculty member, individuals should have the freedom to develop their own professional development agenda and to participate in activities that they find most helpful for keeping current in their discipline. A recent study of professional development programs for community college occupational-technical faculty (Hoerner, et al, 1991) concluded that there is no single best approach to faculty development; it varies from individual to individual. This study concluded that too much structure can inhibit rather than facilitate professional development, which indicates the need for flexibility in professional development programs.

All faculty should not be expected to be involved in traditional scholarly endeavors; this is simply an unreasonable request, given the current workload. However, if professional development becomes an institutional priority, then faculty will undoubtedly become involved in scholarship, because adequate professional development is a necessary prerequisite of scholarship. Garrison recognized in 1967 that "the key to quality in the [community] colleges, as of course in any schools, is the skilled, fully professional teacher" (p. 80). Institutional support and development of skilled, professional community college English faculty is long overdue.

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